DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 448 248 UD 033 907

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TITLE	Preventing Student Sexual Harassment. ERIC Digest Number 160.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, New York, NY.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	EDO-UD-00-9
ISSN	ISSN-0889-8049
PUB DATE	2000-12-00
NOTE	4p.
CONTRACT	ED-99-CO-0035
AVAILABLE FROM	ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, Institute for Urban and Minority Education, Box 40, Teacher College, Columbia University, New York, NY 10027. Tel: 800-601-4868 (Toll Free). For full text: http://eric-web.tc.columbia.edu.
PUB TYPE	ERIC Publications (071) -- ERIC Digests in Full Text (073)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Bullying; Educational Environment; Elementary Secondary Education; *Prevention; School Safety; Sex Discrimination; *Sexual Harassment; Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS	ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

This digest reviews effective strategies currently used by schools to combat sexual harassment. Sexual harassment is considered any unwelcome behavior of a sexual nature that interferes with the life of the target individual. Experts agree that sexual harassment is about power, not sex. A serious effort to keep a school free of sexual harassment involves the commitment of the whole school, school district, and community to a multidimensional approach and long-term educational strategies. Student education about harassment needs to be age and grade appropriate. A curriculum on human sexuality can cover harassment, but the problem can be discussed in other courses. Schools need to build students' self-esteem. It is also important for every school and school district to have a policy that prohibits all forms of sexual harassment and mandates equitable treatment for all students. If an incident of harassment occurs, everyone involved should have the opportunity to describe the harassment. Consequences for harassers should include remediation as well as punishment. Schools can choose a student empowerment approach in which targets confront their harassers, but such meetings should only occur in the presence of the school investigator. Schools should conduct professional development sessions on sexual harassment and violence for all staff members, and they can educate parents about sexual harassment through meetings and workshops that explain the schools' antiharassment policies and enlist parent support. In the current social climate, the need to deliver a strong and effective antiharassment message is greater than ever. (Contains 10 references.) (SLD)

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ED 448 248

PREVENTING STUDENT SEXUAL HARASSMENT
DIGEST NUMBER 160, EDO-UD-00-9, DECEMBER 2000

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UD033907

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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON URBAN EDUCATION

DIGEST

Number 160, December 2000 EDO-UD-00-9 ISSN 0889 8049

PREVENTING STUDENT SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Peer sexual harassment among students is a complex, and widespread, problem with significant effects on the perpetrator, the victim, and the school environment. While most targets do not report harassment, surveys indicate that well over half of all students have been harassed, with females, youth of color, and gays most frequently targeted (American Association of University Women, AAUW, 1993; Gustavsson, & MacEachron, 1998; Shoop & Hayhow, 1994). Schools, under both social and legal pressure, are developing policies for keeping their environment safe for all students and procedures for dealing appropriately with harassment when it occurs. This digest reviews effective anti-harassment strategies currently employed by schools.

Peer Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment is considered any "unwelcome behavior of a sexual nature that interferes with" the life of the target(s); it is "unsolicited and nonreciprocal" (Shoop & Edwards, 1994, p. 17). Harassment includes use of sexist terms, comments about body parts, sexual advances, unwanted touching, gestures, taunting, sexual graffiti, and rumor mongering about a classmate's sexual identity or activity. Generally, any behavior of a sexual nature that provokes undesirable, uncomfortable feelings in a target can be considered harassment. Repeated harassment is bullying (*Sexual Harassment Guidance*, 1997; Stein & Sjostrom, 1994).

Experts agree that sexual harassment is about power, not sex. The deeply ingrained societal beliefs that women should be subservient to men, and that "real men" are macho, foster boys' convictions that harassment is an acceptable way to communicate with girls. The advertising and entertainment media perpetuate these prejudices and stereotypes, and family behaviors may do so as well (Shoop & Edwards, 1994). Further, the current practice of integrating girls into classes and activities previously dominated by boys can threaten boys' self-concept of superiority, and cause them to act out alone or in groups (Shoop & Edwards, 1994).

The lives of girls targeted for harassment are often severely compromised. Targets may become truant and less academically successful. They may feel self-conscious, and even develop psychopathologies and physical symptoms (AAUW, 1993; Shoop & Hayhow, 1994).

Legally, sexual harassment is considered a form of sex discrimination, and is specifically prohibited by several Federal laws and an array of state laws. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 has been extended by some courts to include peer harassment in school. Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 has been used to financially compensate victims of harassment in schools. Another Federal civil rights law, 42 U.S.C. §1983, has also been used successfully to sue schools that failed to protect students from peer harassment (*Sexual Harassment Guidance*, 1997).

School Initiatives on Sexual Harassment

A serious effort keep a school free of sexual harassment involves the commitment of the whole school (and district) community and requires a systemic, multidimensional approach and long-term educational strategies. The goals are to maintain an environment that fosters appropriate and respectful behavior and cooperative interactions among students; to employ only non-sexist curriculum and teaching methods; to promote staff modeling of non-sexist behavior; and to indicate clearly that harassment will not be tolerated (Brandenburg, 1997; *Protecting Students*, 1999; Shoop & Edwards, 1994).

Student Education about Harassment

All education about harassment needs to be age and grade appropriate. It should describe what types of conduct constitute harassment; but, to reduce the possibility of establishing a climate of fear, the curriculum should help students distinguish between contact perceived as menacing (and a violation of the target's privacy) and flirting, which can be desired, feels good, makes the recipient happy, and increases self-esteem (Shoop & Hayhow, 1994; Steineger, 1997).

A curriculum on human sexuality can easily cover harassment, but the problem can also be discussed in other courses: history, social studies, contemporary issues, English, and health education. Co-teaching by males and females sends "a powerful message...about the relevance of sexual harassment to both sexes" (Stein & Sjostrom, 1994, p. 3). Classes should include both male and female students so they can gain an understanding of each other's perceptions. It is critical not to make the males feel threatened (Brandenburg, 1997).

Because empowerment is one of the best ways to prevent harassment, schools need to build students' self-esteem. Girls can be taught "assertiveness skills" to enable them to express their feelings clearly and help them stop harassment should it occur. Boys can be taught how to communicate with girls in positive ways. Discussions of sex roles and gender stereotypes can provide valuable information about both sexes. Guest speakers, videos, printed materials, and web sites can enliven discussions. Finally, curricula should help students understand that engaging in harassment is a choice that someone makes (Brandenburg, 1997; *Protecting Students*, 1999; Shoop & Edwards, 1994).

Anti-Harassment Policy

Every school (and district) should have a policy that prohibits all forms of sexual harassment and mandates equitable treatment for all students. It should be comprehensive, clearly written, and sufficiently explicit so that students and parents, as well as educators, know what is expected of everyone. It should also be reevaluated and reissued annually.

The policy should urge the targets of sexual harassment to report their victimization promptly. It should announce that all complaints will be full heeded, and that retaliation against complainants will be not tolerated. The policy should state that unbiased investigators, who are named, will conduct a full hearing. It should also indicate that complainants' statements will be kept as confidential as is possible, that complainants do not have to face their harassers, and that complainants can end the school's infor-

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mal practice at any time and make a formal criminal complaint. It should also state that the goal of the investigation will be a fair resolution that includes, if warranted, appropriate and corrective action. Possible consequences for harassment should be specified (Shoop & Hayhow, 1994; Steineger, 1997).

A school's anti-harassment policy must be well-publicized throughout the school and community, through public posting and age-appropriate discussion. It should also be provided to families (*Protecting Students*, 1999; Shoop & Edwards, 1994).

Responses to Harassment

Attempts to elicit information should give everyone involved (including witnesses) the opportunity to describe the harassment and convey relevant information in their own words. The targets should be asked about the effects of the harassment on them personally and the solution to the problem that they desire, such as cessation of the offensive behavior, an apology, a transfer out of the class or activity where the harassment occurred, counseling for the harasser, school punishment of the harasser, or the filing of criminal charges. They should be given support, including counseling if warranted (Shoop & Edwards, 1994; Shoop & Hayhow, 1994).

The consequences for harassers should include remediation as well as punishment; they need to appreciate that their actions are harmful and to learn more acceptable behavior (*Protecting Students*, 1999). Punishment should fit the offense in severity, both because that is fair and because under- or over-reactions diminish respect for the problem of harassment (Stein, 1999).

Schools can also choose to use the "student empowerment approach," whereby targets confront their harassers. This strategy, which prevents accused harassers from claiming their behavior was welcomed, can be effective; one-third stop their offensive behavior when directly confronted (Shoop & Edwards, 1994). Meetings should occur only in the presence of the school investigator. Alternatively, targets can write their harassers a letter, fully stating what they believe happened, how they feel about it, and what they want to happen next. Targets should never be coerced into attending a meeting or writing a letter; and the accused should not be forced into a meeting (*Protecting Students*, 1999; Stein, 1999).

Professional Development

Schools should schedule a half to a full day of interactive training on sexual harassment and violence, facilitated by an expert in the field, for all staff members. Training should cover the nature of harassment, ways to spot it and changes in students which suggest they are being targeted, procedures for reporting harassment, and strategies for dealing with the claimants and the accused. Staff designated as investigators and teachers whose curricula contain information about harassment should receive additional training (*Protecting Students*, 1999; Shoop & Edwards, 1994; Stein, 1999; Steineger, 1997).

Family Involvement

Children learn how to view, and respond to, the world from a variety of sources, especially their families, who provide a *de facto* education through their own conduct. Parents can also help their children make judgments about what they see and hear in the media and community, build self-esteem that deflects negative emotions resulting from victimization, and develop skills to resist personal impulses and peer pressure to behave badly. They can respond to the targeting of their children by believing what they say and helping them report incidents (Shoop & Hayhow, 1994).

Schools can educate parents about sexual harassment through meetings and workshops that explain their anti-harassment policy and enlist their support and suggestions. They can also describe gender-fair child-rearing strategies and offer suggestions for parent-child discussions on related issues: sex education, sex equity, and sexism (Brandenburg, 1997; Stein, 1999).

Parents who believe that their children's school does not have a comprehensive policy, or that its staff does not understand the relationship between sexual stereotyping, sexism, and sexual harassment, have an obligation to seek a response to their concerns.

Conclusion

While the overall climate of tolerance has been increasing in the U.S., hostility—and even exhortations to violence— toward groups prone to verbal and physical victimization expressed in some popular music and films have become more pronounced. Youth are most susceptible to these messages, and unchecked verbal and physical sexual harassment in children can lead to even more destructive behavior when they become adults, such as domestic violence and hate crime (Shoop & Hayhow, 1994). Thus, the need for schools and families to deliver a strong and effective anti-harassment message has become even more necessary.

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This Digest was developed by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. ED-99-CO-0035. The opinions in this Digest do not necessarily reflect the position or policies of OERI or the Department of Education.

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